

A Brief Study of Feminism as a Movement

Inderjeet^{1*} Dr. Mukesh Kumar²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, CMJ University, Shillong, Meghalaya

² Department of English, Govt. College, Bhiwani

Abstract – The definition of the term ‘feminism’ differs from person to person. According to the French models of feminism, it implies sexual expression. If we take into account the British models, all feminists slowly become respectable, or acclaimed into the male world order. If we consider American models, they are more outspoken. Chaman Nahal in his article, “Feminism in English Fiction”, defines feminism as “a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materialises.

-----◆-----

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Simone de Beauvoir: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine”.² According to her, women are considered secondary in relation to men from the ancient time. It is not necessity of feminine feature but it is the result of education and social tradition under the control of men. Women’s dignity failed but they stand on the same ground of intellectual and professional equality. This has given rise to social evils also. Feminism is a movement influenced by the ideas postulated, popularized and precipitated by thinkers and authors like Alice Walker, Naomi Littlebear, Judith Felterbey, Michele Wallace, Lillian Smith, Elaine Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett and others. It is a modern movement expressing protest against the male domination. It provides strategies for change.

THE AIM OF FEMINIST

The aim of feminist is to understand women’s oppression keeping in mind race, gender, class and sexual preference. Today many people feel that feminism has almost ended because it has nearly won the war at most of the fronts by achieving for women equality with men in all walks of life — political, social, economic etc. But the fact is that the feminist movement is still going quite strong all over the world with the prospects of getting stronger in the near future. The origin of violence against women is seen in the subordination of women in the world. In ‘Manusmriti’, Manu has given secondary place to women.

The same thing is reflected in Islam and Christianity. Great thinkers like Aristotle, Rousseau, Hegel, Sartre, Freud and Nietzsche consider women inferior. According to Simone de Beauvoir, “The situation of woman is that she is a free and autonomous being like all human creatures — nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.”³ Two of the most important works of contemporary feminist theory — Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and Mary Daly’s *Beyond God the Father* derive their ideological premise from the twentieth-century philosophical movement, existentialism.

This body of ideas was itself rooted in the theoretical constructs of Several German philosophers: Hegel, Hessel and Heidegger, but had its most popular formulation in the works of French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre. The early editions of The Oxford English Dictionary defined feminism as a state of being feminine or womanly as did the 1901 edition of The Dictionary of Philosophy. By 1906, however, the Dictionnaire de Philosophie defined feminism as a position favourable to the rights of women. The Webster’s Dictionary defines the term ‘feminism’ as the principle that women should have political rights equal to those of men. Toril Moi says, “The words ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new Woman’s Movement which emerged in the late 1960s.”⁴ Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, “The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers.”⁵ Feminism is a philosophy that fights against such definitions of masculine and feminine, and aims at placing women in a just perspective. The word ‘feminism’ however, must be understood in its broadest sense as referring to an intense awareness of identity as a woman,

and interest in feminine problems. Its meaning should not be restricted to the advocacy of women's rights.

Feminism tends to be thought of as a movement of women, and many feminists absolutely reject the idea of allowing men into it. However, men can be as strongly opposed to the injustices from which women suffer as women can. Feminism is not concerned with a group of people it wants to benefit, but with a type of injustice it wants to eliminate, even though on the whole the elimination of that injustice is beneficial to women than men, yet feminism is not just a movement in favor of women, but it is a movement in support against injustice. Toril Moi has used the term 'post-feminism' to cover the different configurations of feminism and post-modernism present today. Present-day feminist theorists believe that, strictly speaking, feminism is an impossible position. The agonistic definition of feminism sees it as the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression. Such an oppositional definition posits feminism as the necessary resistance to patriarchal power. Logically then the aim of feminism as an emancipatory theory becomes to abolish itself along with its opponent. "In a non-sexist, non-patriarchal society, feminism will no longer exist."⁶ Feminism is committed to the struggle for equality for women, an effort to make women become like men.

But the struggle for equal rights historically and politically emphasizes the value of women as they are. The very argument rests precisely on the fact that women are already as valuable as men are. But in the situation of women's lack of equal rights, this value must be located as difference, not as equality. Women are of equal human value, when feminism represents the value of women as women, it efficiently counters the systematic devaluation of women under patriarchy. Julia Kristeva suggests, A third space for feminism to operate — the space which deconstructs all identity, all binary oppositions. But again, in deconstructing patriarchal metaphysics, the risk of deconstructing the very logic that sustains the two forms of feminism — of sameness and difference — cannot be avoided. And so the three 'spaces' of feminism are logically and often strategically incompatible. The post-modern feminists are wary of definitions of any kind. Alice Jardine states: Who and what, then do we mean by "feminist"? That word...poses some serious problems. Not that we would want to end up demanding a definition of what feminism is, and therefore, of what one must do, say, and be, if one is to acquire the epithet; dictionary meanings are suffocating, to say the least.⁸ Jardine states: "Feminism is generally understood as a movement from the point of view of, by and for women."⁹ She suggests feminism as a movement by women which takes on different and very specific forms in different contexts.

The contents of the early feminist theory reflect the declining power of women of rank and the enforced

domestication of middleclass women. Yet this theory derived strength from the new powers of education some of these women had at their command. In the 1630s and 1650s, many of the radical English sects supported religious equality for women. In this situation, there were women who liberated themselves from the male authority. In the 19th and the early 20th centuries feminism focused on the acquisition of a few basic political rights and liberty for women. The period from 1920 to 1960 is known as the period of intermission in the history of the women's rights movement when a sense of self-satisfaction prevailed. For contemporary feminists, different processes of socialization account for a larger part of the observed differences in the behavior of men and women. Today feminists protest against the way the social institutions, supported by cultural values and normative expectations force women into an unreasonably narrow role.

Feminism is a philosophy that fights against such definitions of masculine and feminine, and aims at placing women in a just perspective. However, the term 'feminism' must be understood in its broadest sense as referring to an extreme awareness of identity as a woman and interest in feminine problems. Its meaning should not be restricted to the advocacy of women's rights. Feminism has become an international school. There are different schools like Liberal, Marxist, Socialist, Existentialist and Postmodern etc. These theories cover several aspects of life aiming at women's liberty. There are different Feminists Theories also such as:

- (1) Liberal Theory: It arose from liberalism. It aims at doctrines of Justice, Liberty and Equality to women. This feminism views liberation for women as the freedom to determine their own social role and to compete with men on terms that are as equal as possible. Mary Woolstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Betty Friedan are the exponents of this theory.
- (2) Marxist Theory: It insists on the economy of women. The understanding of relations between class and sex are important. Woman was treated as a property. This was exploitation. The special oppression of women results primarily from their traditional position in the family.
- (3) Radical Theory: This theory considers the oppression of women as the ugliest form of cruelty. It insists on the independence of women. They believe that women are not child-bearing machines. The radical feminists hold that the roots of women's oppression are biological. The origin of women's subjection lies in the fact that because of the weakness caused by childbearing, women become dependent on men for physical survival. This theory rejects social institutes like family and

marriage.

- (4) Psychoanalyst Theory: This theory believes that women's oppression takes place because of Oedipus Complex. Freud said that sexuality is male centric and so women suffer.
- (5) Existentialist Theory: All these theories are not enough to express women's otherness. Existential theory says that women are oppressed because of her otherness.
- (6) Post Modern Theory: This theory criticizes the patriarchal order.

The writing of certain postmodern writers favors freedom for women. They believe that women must develop feminine writing to change the world which is defined by men. Thus, feminism appears in various forms such as radical, socialist, marxist, lesbian and so on but at the root, it is basically a concept concerned with the question of identity among women who share similar experiences in life. Traditionally, feminism was a mass movement in the sense that women clamored for political equality, civil rights, job opportunities etc. Today the movement has assumed an individualistic nature where women demand human rights and personal independence. They are aware of their exploitation, conscious of their rights and willingly compromise with situations. The term feminism itself demands a broader definition. In a generic way, it has come to mean a movement to support the demand for equal, political and economic rights with men.

Feminism does not mean only an awareness of women's plight but also a determination to change the situation. The treatise 'Half the Sky' defines feminism as "the awareness of the women's position in society as one of disadvantages or inequality compared with that of men and also a desire to remove those disadvantages."¹⁰ According to Simone de Beauvoir, the woman is "defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the other."¹¹ Man always thinks that he is in the right, while woman is in the wrong; all the negative qualities are assigned to her. He is afraid of feminine competition. De Beauvoir discusses about the topics like sexual initiation, sexual pleasure for women. She states that woman is not a free agent in choosing the man of her erotic destiny. Man is never consistent; he wants his wife to be passionate with him but indifferent to other men as a whole. He wants her to be entirely his. Thus, she is betrayed from the day he marries her. Bound to one man, with children to tend, woman's life is over.

She finds no future other than of her husband's. De Beauvoir says that the bond between man and woman

should be based on common love and consent. She also deals with different issues such as unwanted motherhood, the unmarried mother and abortion. She concludes that women should be freed from the bonds of slavery. Once Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India said, "you can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women."¹² This is perfectly true. Woman of any nation is the mirror to its civilization. If women enjoy good status, it shows that the society has reached a level of maturity and sense of responsibility. The change in the status of women in India is a slow, steady and continuing process. It began a century and half ago when Raja Rammohan Roy and his successors and followers focused attention on the social evils. The social status of women in any community is largely dependent on the culture and tradition of the community. In ancient times, Aryans were the main inhabitants of India. These people were mainly Brahmins and they used to give the status of goddess to the women. At that time, the status of women in the households was like 'Lakshmi' (Goddess of wealth). A famous Sanskrit shloka signifies the status of women in that age, 'Yatra naryastu pujiyante, ramante tatra devta' means, the place where women are worshipped, god themselves inhabit that place.

REFERENCES

- Ruhela, Saryu., ed. (2005). Understanding the Indian Women Today: Problems and Challenges. Delhi: Indian Publishers and Distributors, 2005.
- Russell, Bertrand (1999). Marriage and Morals. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Sahgal, Nayantra (1997). Point of View: A Personal Response to Life, Literature and Politics. New Delhi: Prestige Books.
- Satchidanandan, K., ed. (2008). Authors Speak. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Sharma, G.P. (1993) Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction. New Delhi: Sterling Publication.

Corresponding Author

Inderjeet*

Research Scholar, Department of English, CMJ University, Shillong, Meghalaya